

On Iowa's Tenderloin Trail

A Memory Journey by John Busbee

I recently made a 600-mile trek through Northeast Iowa, reaching one certain conclusion. It is time to lay the “who’s Number One” argument to rest. Iowa holds that spot. It is the pork tenderloin sandwich capitol of the world. Not Indiana. Nor Missouri, nor Illinois. With perhaps a bit of Iowa bias shining through, my belief is anchored by Iowa’s leading hog production, far out-distancing 5th place Indiana. From shore to shore, and border to border, Iowa pork producers know their business. These dedicated farmers provide exceptional “culinary clay,” which a myriad of creative chefs across Iowa masterfully convert into The Tenderloin. It is a deceptively simple, yet complex, sandwich. Once each chef achieves their version of perfection, they vie for annual bragging rights as Iowa’s Best Breaded Pork Tenderloin (BPT).

Competition is fierce to hang a coveted Iowa Pork Producers Association (IPPA) “Best” banner at their establishment. Each bestowed banner represents besting countless other restaurateurs for that year’s top recognition. That top-spot designation is displayed with button-popping pride.

The route selected gave this experienced connoisseur of these irresistible edibles an opportunity to critique four exceptional BPTs – three #1 designees, plus a two-time top-5 honoree, within a 40-hour window of delicious dining indulgence. This delectable comparative analysis was a wonderful immersion into dining on Iowa’s signature sandwich entrée. This journey also provided insightful conversations with the creators of these mouthwatering marvels.

The Waukon to St. Olaf to New Hampton to Webster City Tenderloin Trail

My tasteful trip started with a stop at the most recently anointed Iowa BPT champion – Lid’s Bar & Grill in Waukon. I stopped by for an early supper, which co-owner Kelly Liddiard said was wise. Had I waited, the popular dining spot he and his wife own would have been packed. Originally their car dealership, they transformed it into a restaurant when the pandemic drastically impacted car sales.

“There was just hardly anything left for restaurants here in town,” commented Liddiard about the change. Lid’s quickly became a regional go-to dining destination, anchored by its carefully crafted signature sandwich. He proudly shared details about their tenderloin.

“We wanted it to be thick enough that you could actually taste the meat,” he began, with a smile. He continued, praising his relationship with the local food market, Quillan’s Food Ranch, which preps and tenderizes each third-pound tenderloin cut to his specifications. This market also daily bakes the buns that Lid’s uses, a horizontal bookending of bread for the glorious pork core of mouth-watering delight. It is moist, light and flavorful.

I was tempted to order a second on the spot, had time and stomach capacity allowed. I left with a satisfying glow only a great tenderloin can fuel.

After that delicious meal and a night of work, I dallied in Waukon the next morning long enough to arrive at my next stop for lunch. Winding county hardtops took me to the quaint little town of St. Olaf. These two-lane byways, designated by letter-number designations (such as X-28 and B-65), offer drivers a relaxing and up-close experience of Northeast Iowa's beautiful rolling countryside. Always take these roads when time allows, and experience the joy of lessening your blood pressure and ratcheting up your appreciation for the subtle beauty of this state. Wild turkeys and bald eagles were regular roadside attractions, as were many a deer.

Anchoring life on Main Street is the St. Olaf Tavern, home of a BPT that has twice landed in the Top 5. I experienced my first St. Olaf BPT in the 1980s when it was the St. Olaf Tap. From that early memory to this time's first bite, today's visit proved that their creative cooking team's BPT remained true to that original mastery. Deliciously abundant, delectably created, and locally sourced, these folks hand cut, tenderize, and coat their BPTs to order, and the freshness comes bursting through in a pork loin flavor explosion. St. Olaf's has an answer for any sized appetite. Its BPTs range from Mini to Medium to The Big One (4, 8, or 16 ounces), and even offers a grilled version (sans breading) in Medium and Mini sizes (10, or 5 ounces). Hungry first-timers, ordering The Big One, often laugh when their order arrives. The Mutt and Jeff disparity between the massive loin spreading to the edge of the plate, perched between two halves of a dainty bit of bun, is smile-inducing. The taste, however, is Iowa dining heaven. The Big One seems about the size of a cultivator disc. My strategy for conquering this BPT-to-bun conundrum was to quarter it, stack two pieces into the bun (which still could not contain that much meat), and begin the savory deliciousness of just the BPT without bread as an appetizer. I completed my feast with a doubly thick BPT sandwich. Oh, my - a double dose of porky perfection.

The rest of the day was spent meandering more county roads, enjoying the diversity of Iowa countryside, farms, majestic barns and more. I refilled my appreciation tank for the humility and reserved humor of rural Iowa. One town's greeting proclaimed, "Farmersburg: The Small Town in the Country." Hyperbole is not a part of the rural mystique. Farmsteads were lovingly cared for, with manicured lawns, outbuildings showing the care of proud families. Many barns were adorned with brightly painted quilt patterns, an homage to quilting heritage.

My destination was Charles City, the next stop for business. But, first, an early supper stop in New Hampton. Back-to-back tenderloin meals. Some may call this overindulgence. I call it a specialized food critiquing opportunity.

New Hampton is home to The Pub at the Pinicon, the 2019 winner of Best BPT. Owners Dale and Laura Reicks source of the restaurant's pork from the Reicks View Farms in Lawler, a family farm founded in 1979. This

restaurant and events center has operated more than 60 years, and Manager Phil Zwanziger stated that receiving that award in 2019 was “a badge of honor for our restaurant.” This dining spot understands the importance of the pork industry in Iowa, and how much Iowans love a good breaded pork tenderloin.

“The best compliment we can receive in our business is that we serve a good, tasty product,” Zwanziger states with pride.

After that meal and another night of work, the final leg of this culinary adventure found me in Webster City. This is a tidy, obviously very popular place: the Grid Iron Grill & Sports Bar. Their 2017 banner proudly welcomes regulars and newbies alike, and the warm atmosphere presaged another fine dining experience.

Owner Burke Risetter shared the evolution that led to his sandwich’s Number 1 ranking. I knew that I was talking to a specialist in the field of BPT creation, a true connoisseur capable of achieving gold medal status while honoring Iowa’s iconic imbibement. His attention to detail, under a meticulously controlled processing regimen, produces a consistently perfect breaded tenderloin.

“I wanted to be sure that customers getting the last tenderloin of the day experienced the same quality as those getting the first one each day,” Risetter shared, laying the foundation for achieving his number one sandwich. With the dedication of a culinary Thomas Edison, he experimented until the egg wash temperature was consistent. He regularly sifted the coating to eliminate any lumps that developed after coating several loins. His final step to achieving a magnificent breaded pork tenderloin was using one fryer dedicating to only cooking tenderloins. This attention to detail and hard work earned him IPPA’s “Best” recognition. The constant flow of satisfied customers confirmed this status as they consumed Risetter’s pinnacle of pork perfection, delivered in its golden-coated glow, ready to satisfy each eagerly awaiting appetite. Add my name to the list of Risetter’s fans.

Last crumbs on the plate

While Hoosiers continue clamoring their origin rights of the Breaded Pork Tenderloin, they really should concede that, in all likelihood, long ago in some vintage kitchen nestled in the Czech neighborhood of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, an innovative immigrant conceived a way to more conveniently bring the delicious taste of the Wiener schnitzel to the new world of America. Or, more specifically, Iowa. Being the gracious, self-effacing peoples we Iowans are, when word reached this culinary enclave about this new variation of pork deliciousness from a boisterous, self-promoting push cart vendor in Huntington, Indiana, the Czech-Iowans merely smiled. They knew the true origins, comforted by the knowledge of its Iowa-based creation, and graciously let their needier brethren from the east lay their false claim for the genesis of such a beloved sandwich. If it makes our kindred BPT lovers

in Indiana feel better, they can lay claim to the first. Iowa will always hold the top spot as the best.

What I found with each sandwich was the culinary variety akin to songbirds. Each has its own special nuances. They all share a collective glory through their unique culinary tunes. Each delivers a succulent, meaty white cut of pork loin, sheathed in a light, delectable coating, and deep fried to golden, mouth-watering perfection. I cannot imagine living in a part of the world that does not make breaded pork tenderloins.

When I share my recent tenderloin adventure with friends, the inevitable question pops up – “which tenderloin was your favorite?” Since I have no stake in any of the aforementioned dining establishments or, as my grandfather often said, “I ain’t got no dog in the hunt,” I was free to rate and rank the four participating pork fritters with bold candor. My answer is easy: I had four favorites. Each was the one I had most recently savored. How’s that for Iowa nice?

Now, where shall I travel next? Iowa is my oyster, and it is filled with pork pearls waiting to be delightfully consumed.

Happy Trails,
The Tenderloin Taster

John Busbee is a freelance writer and creative project developer. His published works appear in Iowa History Journal, ia Magazine, and Voices from the Prairie, to name a few. His monthly columns appear in Cityview and Little Village magazines. His weekly arts & culture radio show, The Culture Buzz, has been produced since 2007. He was honored with the 2014 Iowa Governor’s Award for Collaboration and Partnership in the Arts. As a SE Iowa farm boy, he served as Henry County 4-H President, the apex of his political aspirations, and raised market litters as his primary project. County Fair blue ribbons were the pinnacle of his pork production prowess.